1 Boundary zone

The contrast was striking. I emerged from the hushed environment inside of one of Canada's largest museums, the Royal Ontario Museum, on a chilly day in January 2009 and met with a raucous wall of bodies hoisting placards and green, red and white flags. Young people mostly, in black and white chequered scarves, but a scattering of older folk as well. They were not looking back at the museum though; this crowd was decidedly fixated on the Israeli consulate across the street. ROM security guards patrolled the boundary between the protesters and the museum, keeping a pathway clear for visitors going in and out of the building.

Boundary zone not contact zone

Museum visitors were curious, not frightened. Some, like me, moved into the crowd and asked, 'what's going on?' Gaza protest. They snapped pictures. It was exciting. Demonstrators carrying flags of Lebanon and flags of Israel linked arms. Across the street a small throng behind a barrier shouted and gestured back at the protesters. An age-old quarrel.

I revelled in the exhilaration of the moment, that sense of being in the middle of something happening, something important because so many people were disturbed. And I wondered about the crazy juxtaposition here, not of warring activists from two sides of a long-standing conflict, but of this agitated public scene beside the cool, silent Crystal, the new museum building towering above. The square outside had become a public space for strident assembly although it had nothing to do with the museum. Why did this strike me as incongruous, or even ironic? The craggy architectural addition jutting out of the staid old museum exudes a sense of radical change; a collision of old and new (as often remarked by visitors), that should complement this kind of activist encounter. But instead I perceived a boundary between the institution and this kind of performance.

This is not to say that the Royal Ontario Museum (the ROM) had not proposed to be a place that could take on some of this excitement, activism, and change. This institution offered 'engagement' – but a gentile, polite, and managed engagement. I do not infer that museums must organize or host the kinds of democracy-in-action activities I witnessed on the ROM's doorstep. But I am asking, what does it take for the museum to truly live up to promises of engagement and act in ways that do not make me wonder at the incongruity of this scene? As impressive locations in the public sphere, as forms of media digested by mass publics, and as sites of government-funded public culture, why should I not expect and anticipate that this kind of performance would occur in the contact zone around the ROM? And how might a museum like the ROM react to and contribute to such enactments of public debate?

What intrigued me about this demonstration at its entrance doors was the relationship of this museum to public acts of politics. This was not the first time that social protests had engulfed the building. Located at the corner of two major streets in downtown Toronto, a scant 500 metres from the provincial legislature, the building has witnessed scores of political mobilizations, including the violent G20 repressions in June 2010 that had coincided with the opening ceremonies of the ROM's Terracotta Warriors blockbuster exhibition (another interesting juxtaposition). Despite its position as an institution devoted to producing and sharing knowledge, issues of power and politics rarely cross the border between those activities inside and outside the museum's walls.

The common thread that drew my attention outside the ROM the day of the Gaza protest was the *public* nature of this event: of this place, of this activity and its sensibility, and of the people who were present at the time. We were 'in public', on view, inhabiting public space, with a shared concern, situated next to a public institution with its own public role and public face – who drew a boundary between what it did and what the protesters were doing. But in addition, I was involved and complicit, on an even more personal level, with the publicness offered by the ROM within that boundary: I was a museum volunteer. I was in the museum, welcoming visitors on my bi-weekly shift, that day I encountered the Gaza protest outside. I was personally 'in public', on view, inhabiting public space, but in a vastly different manner. Thus, the nature of the museum's 'publicness' was even more striking to me, and appeared to be the right question to be discussing. The concept 'public' lies at the heart of democracy, where people come together to sort out matters of shared concern and must deal with both power and politics. From my embedded experience, the normative understanding of 'publicness' within museums like the ROM somehow avoids facing the political nature of the concept.

As a cultural studies scholar, I have been curious about how people participate and share in culture, particularly heritage-making practices, with culture and heritage writ large to include diverse activities from art exhibitions to quilting circles to protest marches. Relations and struggle over meaning-making are all central to cultural studies, involving power, control, and agency as well as sharing, community, and dialogue. Museums are situated as primary agents of meaning-making in the public sphere, in both their official capacity as quasi-governmental institutions and on an informal level as spaces for social interactions. I was interested in the ways that contemporary museums were attempting to reposition themselves in society as sites of meaning-making, seeking new roles, new audiences, and new activities. But in their search for new purpose, it seemed that the 'public' nature of their institutional role was in retreat. While 'public service' is well understood as the traditional mission of most museums, attitudes towards their publicness appear to have changed, challenged by state funding squeezes, shrinking government services, and the popularization and privatization of public culture. How do museums now view their public role, their public face, and their public responsibilities in relation to what goes on in the outside world? And what is the inherent politics in this work, which intervenes in human attitudes and relationships, and legitimizes particular ways of knowing?

A Museum in Public critically examines the assumptions that are made about the publicness of museum operations within one case study – the Royal Ontario Museum, Canada's largest museum. The book interrogates the public nature and political dynamics at the ROM as it carried out a complex revisioning of its public face: the multi-million-dollar Renaissance ROM (RenROM) project. The ROM is one of the few 'universal' museums in Canada, part of an international club of institutions like the British Museum and the Smithsonian Institution. During the RenROM project the museum was in a unique position of flux, transforming its architectural spaces and situating itself anew in relation to its globalizing context and community. In 2000, the ROM hired a new Director and CEO, William Thorsell, who came up with a dazzling plan to transform the museum, an architectural renaissance in the way the institution would show off its vast collections, but also transformational in the way it would solicit public engagement. That revitalization project was intended to show the museum as more dynamic, more relevant and, as one staff member remarked, 'a leading voice in the cultural life of the city' (Exhibit planner, 20 November 2009). The Governors' office enthusiastically described their Renaissance ROM project as one of the largest museum projects in the world and one of the most significant cultural projects in Canada.

Figure 1.1 Royal Ontario Museum.
Source: photo courtesy of the author, Susan Ashley.

The Royal Ontario Museum was a 'public' institution, serving the public trust, and supported in part by allocations of provincial government monies of almost $28 million Cdn a year at the time of the research in 2009. It was obliged to account for its activities in public, transparent ways to the provincial government. It boasted over a million admissions of 'the public' every year; roughly half Canadians mostly from Toronto and southern Ontario (ROM Annual Report 2009). In addition to presenting itself 'in public' to these 'publics' through its stunning architectural presence at Bloor St. and Avenue Rd. in Toronto, the museum interacted with the world and exemplifies its public nature through a range of communicative means both on-site and externally. It presented permanent galleries and temporary exhibitions, hosted many thousands of school children, and offered tours, concerts, lectures, events, and a range of other programmes. It also positioned itself as a public agent through member services, volunteer programmes, research affiliations, media relations, marketing, international agreements, and other forms of corporate publicness.

I was interested in what, how, and why knowledge was created, shaped, represented, consumed, and debated publicly through the museum in this

period, stressing the communicative nature of this process. The research employed an empirically and critically engaged analysis of the nature of the 'renaissance' that occurred at the ROM within the frame of the museum 'in public'. I studied how publicness was reflected in the attitudes and behaviours of management, staff, and visitors, building upon an ethnographic description of several facets of institutional operations. I demonstrate in the following pages how this museum's public function *was* transformed. Not only were the ROM's workers and managers redefining objectives and methodologies for this institution, but the museum was under unprecedented public scrutiny by governments, patrons, the media, audiences, and local residents. But while the renaissance project transformed the museum's physical character, the museum's new orientation towards public service called into question how it defined public value and served the public interest. It revealed the fundamental politics of power and status at work, where a publicness proposed as contact zone was hindered by acts of boundary-making.

Argued here is that the new public face of the ROM was a rhetorical one, a case of 'in public' celebrity that performed a reputation of relevance and engagement but did not manifest these qualities behind the scenes. While its corporate positioning spoke of public engagement and dialogue, its actions in practice demonstrated historical preoccupations of ownership and governance bound to property and status. Boundaries persisted between institutional interests and practices, and the lives and concerns of people for whom this public museum existed. This divide was the very essence of an 'in public' style of publicness: engagement as publicity not politics. This book contends that removing the boundaries between words and deeds, and between inside and out, is the essence of true publicness in its richest sense of bridging, dialogue, and democratic encounter. It offers insights into how – and whether – museums like the ROM might achieve political publicness through transparent, open and democratic communicative action. Such a process required significant organizational change, with removal of boundaries between rhetoric and deeds, management and workers, and inside and outside the museum.

Framing this study of museums and publicness

Publicness and the public sphere have been a focus of attention for political, communication, social, and cultural studies theorists. Publicness is defined here as 'The quality, condition, or fact of being public'; 'concerning the people' and/or 'being open to view' (Oxford English Dictionary). The publicness of museums is studied here from a cultural and communications disciplinary perspective, as a quality that relates to

transparency: performances 'in public' can reveal workings of power within motivations, assumptions, and purposes. *A Museum in Public* takes an interdisciplinary perspective on museums as complex media forms communicating symbolic or expressive or meaning-making aspects of social behaviour, on both formal and informal levels. How cultural and social relationships were publicly expressed and negotiated are explored. The nature of these communicative relations has a unique character when enacted 'in public', and a museum's organization, in process and structure, can affect this quality in many ways. Important to the study was the cultural product (the museum space and organizational structures), the discursive practices (conditions and relations within its production and reception) and the larger sociocultural, economic, and governmental context and processes within which museums like the ROM are situated.

Museum studies is an interdisciplinary field that Kylie Message has called disciplinary 'borderwork' (Message 2009: 126), which she links to the persistent metaphor invoked by James Clifford (1997) that characterizes the museum as a 'contact zone'. Message argues that scholarly inquiry and debate about museums involves a mediation, transaction, or translation across disciplinary and cultural divides, and invokes both the separation and bringing together of ideas and people in creative juxtaposition. From an interdisciplinary perspective, social, communicative, and cultural processes within museums and the interrelationship of structures, policies, and meanings are all critical to understanding the institution's public nature. Thus my inquiry into the public nature of museums brings into play the boundaries and contact zones of museum studies, as well as the perspectives of communication and cultural studies.

My interest in public culture and communication in museums can also be characterized as critical social science. Bourdieu's concept of cultural 'field' within which social practices are shaped and reproduced through the interactions of various different and unequal agents has shaped this research (Bourdieu 1993). By studying the field, the interrelationship of both objective activities and use of power, and the aspirations, expectations, and actions of people are revealed. 'Critical museology', which has its origins in the new museology movement, also inspects power relationships. Andrew Dewdney describes critical museology as 'the effort to change the practices of museums along the path of their "democratization", or, put another way, towards the realisation of the museum as fully public' (Dewdney 2008). Gray and McCall (2018) call for more research into the material processes of museum bureaucracies as a way of making sense of these questions of control, power and democratization within museums (2018: 128).

This book does this from within one museum organization in a crucial historical period of its existence, looking not just at documentary evidence and interviews with managers from a detached analytical perspective, but taking the subjective outlook of 'engaged scholarship' as an immersed practitioner, to reflect critically on the experience of the researcher in knowledge-making. My own critical cultural studies perspective implies the need to critique and transform social/cultural relations within the field by investigating underlying ideologies or assumptions, analysing processes and practices, and identifying actions to effect change. Further, my viewpoint as a critical practitioner frames how I draw insights as someone embedded in the field, and situates my conclusions as interventions both in theory and in practice.

Critical studies of museums in Canada

A Museum in Public is uniquely situated within the Canadian cultural policy and museum production context, offering an original commentary on capitalism and managerialism within public culture in Canada, as well as contributing to museum theory and practice internationally. Books on Canadian museums are relatively rare and tend towards historical or professional orientations. Interestingly, two leading international perspectives on museum organizations are led by Canadians. Robert Janes is a key critical voice of museum administration internationally, but with actual museum practitioners, the books of Gail and Barry Lord (Lord Cultural Resources) are influential.

The research underpinning this book was undertaken at a time when critical scholarship about museums in Canada was a largely unexplored field (Cheney 2002). Even since that time, assessing the public impact of museums has not been a prominent policy concern in Canada. Museum studies tend to be undertaken to improve the organization and management of museums, more so than how and why museums are organized and managed. Work such as Janes (2009, 2015), Gosselin and Livingstone (2016) and Butler and Lehrer (2016) have made inroads here. Research that has emerged from anthropology, history, and education have foci that reflect those disciplinary perspectives, more so than critical perspectives. Museums have been drawn into debates about identity in Canada, as part of discussions of representation and mediation of public history, and into cultural policy discussions, but only a few have been singled out for exclusive treatment, and usually in relation to key controversies (Livingstone 2016). Studies of Canadian museums as social institutions, with a focus on sociological, communications, or cultural studies perspectives are still infrequent, addressing issues of history, representation, and education

(e.g. Ashley 2005; Gosselin and Livingstone 2016; McTavish 2013). Only a few authors have critically addressed the role of the museum in the public sphere in Canada (e.g. Janes 2009; Trofanenko 2014), and few explicitly theorize on the nature of their publicness (Sharma 2015). The Royal Ontario Museum has been the subject of critical study only in relation to the Into the Heart of Africa exhibit, with several articles and a book on that subject (Butler 1999; Mackey 1995; Tator *et al*. 1998). That there has not been subsequent published work on the ROM is surprising, considering the amount of international attention that exhibition received. As one of the largest public cultural development projects in Canada, the ROM should attract new cultural policy and cultural economy investigations. This book is in the vanguard of this anticipated research.

Within these theoretical and historical perspectives, *A Museum in Public* aims to seriously consider whether the ideals of 'contact zone' and 'engagement' – with their real need for dissent, conflict, and alternative ways of thinking – are practically possible within an administrative setting. It explores how the ROM, at a particular historical juncture in Canada, situated itself as a 'public' cultural institution, operating in the public interest. The volume addresses the underlying assumptions about publicness that were reflected in the formal and informal accounts of the ROM 'in public', that is, within four key areas of public interfaces during the Renaissance ROM project. Questioned is the extent to which the museum served the public interest as a democratizing agent, and the factors that facilitated or hindered the application of this model. The book asks what insights might be drawn from the RenROM situation to inform whether the structure, processes, and practices of museums like the ROM could or should be reconfigured, so they might serve as agents of social change, inclusion, and negotiation.

Methodology

A Museum in Public reports on the ways that the idea of publicness was reconfigured during the Renaissance ROM period, and how it was reflected in the mission, organization, and activities of the museum – the research asks, *what does it mean for a museum to call itself a 'public' institution?* An awareness of the multifaceted, inconsistent, and negotiated nature of publicness underpins this inquiry. Reflexive, ethnographic research methods were used in order to assemble a picture of how the ROM as a case study defined itself as public, and perpetuated public processes within a changing social and economic context. Both texts and discourse were studied, a reflexive sociology approach that calls for a double analysis of social structures and practices from both an objective and a subjective

point of view, allowing close inspection both of relations of power and relations of meaning about any phenomenon (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 120–121). This meant undertaking not only the collection and analysis of objective data of policies, structures, and systems, but also a more subjective, taking-into-account of institutions as they exist in the minds of staff and visitors, and through their actual practices, using cultural, ethnographic tools. This dual approach implied a bridging to examine power structures *and* meaning-making, text, and discourse, on several levels within the institution. Reflexive sociology's two-stream analysis was most useful here because, what Public institutions do, and what they say they are going to do, are worth scrutinizing and are often different because of the rhetoric involved. The constitution of that public interface between rhetoric and actions was the focus of data collection. The ultimate aim was then to offer insights into the nature of the public interest that was served by the ROM and how that reflected a change in orientation, and to flag areas that might have relevance to museums more widely. The conclusions drawn from this research are not intended to provide broad generalizations of museum processes, but rather *to offer a case study of a museum in a state of flux*, a reflexive portrait within a critical perspective that casts light on how people and organizations make sense of their situations at the local level.

The most inhibiting limitation to this research was a problem of publicness: it quickly became evident that transparency, an aspect of publicness, would become an issue. Public access to detailed information, especially documentation, and access to people for interviews was difficult, or very slow. Certain departments seemed more eager to help the research than others. People lower in the hierarchy were most eager to voice conflicts with their senior managers. I could not know whether these transparency difficulties indicated internal dysfunction or absence of mind, or a desire to keep private certain information, or whether they indicated my own mistakes during initial interviews.

In this book

The following narrative first situates the many theoretical perspectives on publicness and the public as descriptive and existential qualities. It then introduces the museum and its RenROM project. Central chapters explore four public, communicative interfaces at the ROM during the revisioning project –Structuring, Positioning, Exhibitioning, and Interacting. The chapters detail these facets of the ROM 'in public' through an objective and a subjective study of the museum's operations, examining power structures and meaning-making, texts and discourse. Each is situated as a

unique organizational point of contact or boundary line reflecting the museum's public functions.

The final chapter wraps up the account of the competing politics and multiple, conflicting ideas about purpose, people, structures, and practices at the ROM. These remarks offer a personal intervention in both theory and practice: expanding both on theories of publicness and on the structures and practice of museum organizations. *A Museum in Public* argues that a clear understanding and application of the concept of 'publicness' is essential to open up the purpose and functioning of museums to democratic practices. Analysis of the institution's corporate positioning and relationships, its organizational structures, its exhibitionary and programming offerings, and its points of face-to-face interactions – all facets of the publicness that might have been subject to a renaissance – suggest that the museum at the time adopted new strategies, but not the kind of renaissance suggested by the museum's claims of change. The institutional face presented to the outside world through these interfaces involved 'publicity' at its most basic, with power and status invoked through each. The RenROM project as it was implemented did not resolve entrenched old-museum habits: wealthy patrons and privileged governing bodies, and old-fashioned exhibitionary and programming methods in its galleries. This apparent lack of change, despite Thorsell's words, revealed embedded attitudes towards the public role of the museum. As critics noted 'it is relatively easy to build or renovate' a museum, but any changes made in the redevelopment had little to do with 'the real issues confronting mainstream museums at a time of unprecedented societal change' (Janes 2010).